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ABSTRACT

This paper comments on issues of quality in early child care and education from an international perspective, asserting that questions about how to determine quality are as complex for early childhood programs as for all other professional services. The paper's introduction discusses the world wide trend of expansion in the amount of out-of-home care offered, the variations in training and government supervision, and the common problems of defining the objectives of early childhood provisions and of providing quality and affordability. The paper then lists five perspectives on assessing quality and states that criteria representing all of these perspectives merit consideration in determining the quality of provisions for the care and education of young children. Each perspective is discussed in detail: (1) the top-down perspective, which typically assesses selected characteristics of the program, setting, equipment, and other features, as seen from above by adults in charge of the program or by those responsible for licensing it; (2) the bottom-up perspective, which attempts to determine how the program is actually experienced by the participating children; (3) the outside-inside perspective, which assesses how the program is experienced by the families it serves; (4) the inside perspective, which considers how the program is experienced by its staff; and (5) the outside perspective, which takes into account how the community and larger society are served by the program. The paper then discusses implications suggested by this formulation of quality assessment, including discrepancies between perspectives, issues of accountability, and the use of high- versus low-inference variables (for example, having to infer deep feelings of participants versus measuring the staff-to-child ratio). The paper concludes that answers to the criteria proposed for each perspective can be used as a basis for decisions about the kinds of modifications to make to the program, but that efforts must continue in developing, adopting, and applying an accepted set of professional standards of practice for which practitioners can fairly be held accountable. Contains 22 references. (EV)

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Multiple Perspectives on the Quality of Programs for Young Children

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Introduction

Concern about the quality of child care programs has been a main topic of conferences, symposia, papers, and reports for about a decade all over the world. This trend is related to the findings from an accumulating body of research indicating that any provision for young children that is less than top quality represents a missed opportunity to make a substantial contribution to their development that has implications for the rest of their lives. However, questions about how to determine quality are as complex for early childhood programs as for all other professional services.

In this presentation I will comment issues of quality in early child care and education provisions from an international perspective. It is surprisingly difficult to examine the issues with much confidence. Even within countries, there are often wide varieties of arrangements for the provision of care and education for the young. Perhaps the only clear world wide trend is that of expansion in the sheer amount of out-of-home care currently being offered. The reasons underlying this expansion vary from one place to another. In some parts of the world increasing family mobility and the reduced availability of customary family care arrangements that accompanies it creates a need for out-of-home care by strangers or institutions. In some cases families are less willing than earlier to ask older-though still-young-siblings to carry heavy child care responsibilities. In some contexts, increasing maternal employment away from home alongside increasing single motherhood has produced a strong demand for early care services. All of these trends are occurring at a time around the world when governments and communities are increasingly concerned about compensatory early education as a way of intervening in less than optimal early childhood environments. Thus, a fairly widespread trend toward emphasizing the educational rather than solely or simply the care functions of early childhood provisions can be observed around the world.

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Patterns of staff qualifications and training are also difficult to summarize from an international perspective. The range of training of staff around the world is from zero to five years. Some of the training is only at the inservice level; some is alongside primary school training; some is university based; some is paramedical in nature, and some is vocational secondary school training. In some countries the training of those working with under three-year-olds is separate from those working with three- to six-year olds. Another salient aspect of the field is the diversity of government supervision arrangements. Some child care services are supervised by public welfare agencies, others by maternal health departments, social service or educational bodies, and still others by church and other charitable organizations, and so forth. There is also a range of permissible adult-child ratio patterns around the world (See for example Caribbean Plan of Action, 1997).

Nearly everywhere there is dissension concerning the objectives of early childhood provisions, and the relative emphasis on education versus care, and on spontaneous play versus formal instruction, especially in cases of compensatory education intended to address the problems of providing equality of opportunity for children of low income families. In many countries there is increasing attention to the issue of providing greater continuity and smoother transitions for children as they move from child care and preschool programs into the beginning of their primary education.

Almost all of these issues can be seen in various parts of the US where recent research suggests that large sectors of child care services are below acceptable quality. This is largely attributable to very high levels of staff turnover or wastage which undermines the stability of relationships for children and as well as the effectiveness of the staff training, usually offered on the job (Schulman & Adams, 1998; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1998).

Some of these issues have been captured under the heading of the so-called QCA trilemma, in which Q stands for quality, C for compensation or wages, and A for affordability to the families in need of the service. These three horns constitute a trilemma in that high quality (Q) requires well trained and well paid staff (C), which would make the service unaffordable (A) to families most in need. However, making the program affordable (A) is typically achieved by offering low wages (C) which, in turn undermines the quality (Q) of the service. There is reason to believe that in many cases, at least in the US, affordability (A) and quality (Q) are obtained by offering very low pay (C) for child care staff who are, in effect, bearing the cost of good quality when it is available.

I have noted with some concern the tendency in some countries (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, the UK), to refer to child care and other kinds of preschool provisions as an "industry." This is increasingly the case in the US as well, though few child care and preschool employees are unionized and thus involved in any kind of industrial negotiations. It would seem far more appropriate to refer to child care as well as preschool education as a service--not to customers, but to clients. In my view, the distinctions between customers and clients are not matters of academic quibbling, but rather characterize the relationships between professionals and those they serve (see Katz, 1995).

I would add that industries, as manifested in factories, are not appropriate models for the conduct of any human services, including preschool education and child care settings. Rather, the nature of families and communities are far more appropriate models for the design of early childhood education services, and, I might add, a main reason for considering mixed-age grouping as potentially beneficial to those being served (see Katz, Evangelou and Hartmann, 1990).

In sum, the issues facing communities and countries in maximizing the developmental potential of all of their young children through high quality services for them is fraught with difficult problems in urgent need of solution. However, agreement among all those concerned on how to define quality is also difficult to obtain. Outlined below is one approach to the issues in defining quality from a variety of perspectives.

Multiple Perspectives on Quality

Any judgment about the quality of a phenomenon requires the application of criteria of some kind. In a sense, all phenomena have quality or qualities. Preschools all have quality - some high and some low, or some good and some poor. The issue in judging that quality is what criteria to use and how should the criteria be determined and selected. Most of the available literature on the quality of early childhood programs suggests that it can be assessed by identifying selected characteristics of the program, the setting, equipment, and other features, as seen from above by adults in charge of the program, or by those responsible for licensing it. Such an approach can be called an assessment of quality from a top-down perspective. Another approach is to take what might be called a bottom-up perspective by attempting to determine how the program is actually experienced by the participating children. A third approach, which could be called an outside-inside perspective, is to assess how the program is experienced by the families served by it. A fourth perspective is one from the inside, which considers how the program is experienced by the staff employed by it. A fifth perspective takes into account how the community and the larger society are served by a program. This can be called the outside or, in a certain sense, the ultimate perspective on program quality. The thesis of this presentation is that criteria representing all of these five perspectives merit consideration in determining the quality of provisions for the care and education of young children.

Approaching assessment of quality raises complex issues concerning the causes of poor quality and how accountability for it should be defined.

Top-down Perspective on Quality

The top-down perspective on quality typically takes into account such program features as:

- The ratio of adults to children;
- The qualifications and stability of the staff;
- The characteristics of adult-child relationships;
- The quality and quantity of equipment and materials;
- The quality and quantity of space per child;
- Aspects of staff working conditions
- Health, hygiene and fire safety provisions, etc.

According to Fiene (1992), such program features as listed above, and typically included in licensing guidelines, are useful as a basis for regulatory strategies for ensuring the quality of early childhood provisions because they are directly observable and enforceable ways by which providers can "set the stage for desirable interaction..." (p. 2). They are also program features that are relatively easy to quantify and require relatively little inference on the part of the observer or assessor.

A briefing paper titled Child Care: Quality is the Issue, prepared by the Child Care Action Campaign and produced by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Ehrlich, n. d.), acknowledges that there is no single definition of quality for the variety of types of child care settings in the United States. However, the briefing paper does list the following basic components of quality: the ratio of children to adults, the size of groups, the availability of staff training, and staff turnover rates (p. 4).

There is substantial evidence to suggest that the program and setting features listed above and commonly included in top-down criteria of quality do indeed predict some effects of an early childhood program (Love, 1993; Beardsley, 1990; Harms & Clifford, 1980; Howes, et al, 1991; Phillips, 1987; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1998).

The Bottom-Up Perspective on Quality

It seems reasonable to assume that the significant and lasting effects of a program on the children depend primarily on how it is experienced by them, from below, so-to-speak. In other words, the actual or true predictor of a program's effects is the quality of life experienced by each participating child on a day-to-day basis.

Bottom-up Criteria. If the child's subjective experience of a program is the true determinant of its effects, meaningful assessment of program quality requires answers to the central question: What does it feel like to be a child in this environment day after day after day[1]? This approach requires making inferences about how each child would answer questions like the following:

- Do I usually feel welcome rather than captured?
- Do I usually feel that I am someone who belongs rather than someone who is just part of the crowd?
- Do I usually feel accepted, understood and protected by the adults, rather than scolded or neglected by them?
- Is my family/group accepted and referred to with respect?
- Am I usually accepted by some of my peers rather than isolated or rejected by them?
- Am I usually addressed seriously and respectfully, rather than as someone who is "precious" or "cute"?
- Do I find most of the activities engaging, absorbing, and challenging, rather than just amusing, fun, entertaining or exciting?
- Do I find most of the experiences interesting, rather than frivolous or boring?
- Do I find most of the activities meaningful, rather than mindless or trivial?
- Do I find most of my experiences satisfying rather than frustrating or confusing?
- Am I usually glad to be here, rather than reluctant to come and eager to leave?

The criteria of quality implied in these questions are based on my own interpretation of what is known about significant influences on children's long term growth, development and learning. Those responsible for programs might make their own list of such questions, based on their own interpretations of what the literature indicates are appropriate experiences for young children. Items should be modified, added or subtracted to correspond to the cultural context in which the judgments are to be made.

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1 The inferred answers to this question should reflect the nature of experience over a given period of time, depending upon the age of the child. Hence the term usually is repeated in most of the questions in the list.

It is generally agreed that on most days, each child in an early childhood program should feel welcome in the setting, should feel that he or she belongs in the group, and should feel accepted, respected, understood and protected by those in charge. Questions concerning other aspects of the child's experiences are included to emphasize the importance of addressing young children's real need to feel intellectually engaged and respected, and to encourage all responsible for them to do more than just keep them busy and happy or even excited.

The last question on the criteria list reflects the assumption that when the intellectual vitality of a program is strong, most children on most days, will be eager to participate and reluctant to leave the program. Their eagerness will be based on more than just the "fun" aspects of their participation. Of course, there are potentially many other factors besides the program itself that might influence children's eagerness to participate in a program. Some children might be concerned about important events at home. In any program any child can have an "off" day or two!

Experience Sampling. The older the children served by a program, the longer the time period required for a reliable bottom-up assessment. The typical daily experience over a period of three to four weeks for preschoolers, and slightly longer periods of assessment for older children may provide sufficient sampling to make reliable assessments and predictions of significant developmental outcomes. Occasional exciting events experienced in early childhood programs are unlikely to affect long term development.

I suggest therefore that the quality of a program is good if it is experienced from the bottom-up perspective as intellectually and socially engaging and satisfying on most days (over a period of about a month), and is not dependent on occasional exciting special events.

Cumulative Effects. Assessment of the quality of experience over appropriate time periods helps address the potential cumulative effects of experience. My assumption here is that some childhood experiences, if rare, may be benign or inconsequential, but if experienced frequently may be harmful or beneficial (See Katz, 1995). For example, being rebuffed by peers once in a while should not be a debilitating experience for a preschooler; but the cumulative effects of frequent rebuffs (e.g. once a day over a period of months) may undermine long term social development substantially. Similarly, block play, project work, and other developmentally appropriate activities may not support long term development if they are available rarely or occasionally, but can do so if they are frequent.

When most of the answers to the questions posed are at the positive end of the continua implied in them, we can assume that the quality of the program is worthy of the children. However, the question of how positive a response should be to meet a standard of good quality remains to be determined.

Needless to say, there are many possible explanations for any of the answers children might give -- if they could -- to the questions listed above. A program should not automatically be faulted for every negative response. In other words, the potential causes of children's negative subjective experiences cannot always or solely be attributed to the staff. For what then, can the staff be appropriately held accountable? I suggest that while they cannot be held accountable for all possible cases of negative experiences, they are accountable for applying all practices acknowledged and accepted by the profession to be relevant and appropriate to the situation at hand.

The Outside-Inside Perspective on Quality

Ideally, assessment of the quality of a program should include the characteristics of parent-teacher relationships (See NAEYC, 1991, pp. 101 - 110). Such assessments depend on how each parent would answer such questions as:

In my relationships with staff they are:

- primarily respectful, rather than patronizing or controlling?
- accepting, open, inclusive, and tolerant, rather than rejecting, blaming, prejudiced?
- respectful of my goals and values for my child[2]?
- welcoming contacts that are on-going and frequent rather than rare and distant?

The positive attributes of parent-teacher relationships suggested above are relatively easy to develop when teachers and parents have the same backgrounds, speak the same languages, share values and goals for children, and in general, like each other. Parents are also more likely to relate to their children's caregivers and teachers in positive ways when they understand the complex nature of their jobs, appreciate what teachers are striving to accomplish, and when they are aware of the conditions under which the staff is working.

Of course, it is possible that negative responses of some parents to some of the questions listed above cannot be attributed directly to the program and the staff, but have causes that staff may or may not be aware of, or able to determine.

2 The concept of respect does not imply agreement or compliance with the wishes of the other.

The Inside Perspective on Quality

The quality of an early childhood program as perceived from the inside, that is, by the staff, might be based on criteria along three dimensions: (a) colleague relationships, (b) staff-parent relationships, and (c) relationships with the sponsoring agency.

Colleague relationships. It is highly unlikely that an early childhood program can be of high quality on the criteria thus far suggested unless the staff relationships within it are also of good quality. An assessment of this aspect of quality would be based on how each member of the staff might answer such questions as:

- On the whole, are relationships with my colleagues:
- supportive rather than contentious?
- cooperative rather than competitive?
- accepting rather than adversarial?
- trusting rather than suspicious?
- respectful rather than controlling?

In principle, good quality environments cannot be created for children (in the bottom-up sense) unless the environments are also good for the adults who work in them. Of course, there may be some days when the experiences provided have been "good" for the children at the expense of the staff (for example, in the US the typical Halloween celebrations); similarly there might be some days when the reverse is the case. However, on the average, I suggest that a good quality program is one in which both children and the adults responsible for them find the quality of their lives together satisfying and interesting.

Staff-parent relationships. It seems reasonable to assume that the relationships between the staff and the parents of the children they serve can have a substantial effect on many of the criteria of quality already proposed. In addition, I suggest that the same set of criteria implied by the questions listed under the outside-inside perspective apply equally to the experience of staff members. Thus assessment of quality from a staff's perspective would require their answers to the question: Are my relationships with parents primarily respectful rather than patronizing or controlling, and so forth.

Certainly parents are more likely to approach teachers and caregivers positively when they themselves initiate respectful and accepting relationships. Such relationships may not be difficult to obtain in Hong Kong. However, in a country like the United States, with its highly mobile and diverse population, it is unlikely that all the families served by a single program, or an individual teacher, are in complete agreement on the program's goals and methods. This lack of agreement inevitably leads to some parental dissatisfaction and parent-staff friction.

The development of positive, respectful and supportive relations between staff and parents of diverse backgrounds usually requires staff professionalism based on a combination of experience, training, and education, as well as personal values.

Staff-sponsor relationships. One potential indirect influence on the quality of a program is the nature of the relationships of staff members with those to whom they are responsible. It seems reasonable to suggest that, in principle, teachers and caregivers treat children very much the way they themselves are treated by those to whom they report. To be sure, some caregivers and teachers rise above poor treatment, and some fall below good treatment. But one can assume that in principle, good environments for children are more likely to be created when the adults who staff them are treated appropriately on the criteria implied by the questions listed above. A recent study by Howes and Hamilton (1993) calls attention to the potentially serious effects of staff turnover on children's subjective experiences of the program. Thus the extent to which program sponsors provide contexts hospitable and supportive of staff should be given serious attention in assessing program quality. Assessment of quality in terms of the inside perspective would be based on the staff's answers to the following questions:

- Are working conditions adequate to encourage me to enhance my knowledge, skills, and career commitment?
- Is the job description and career advancement plan appropriate?
- Am I usually treated with respect and understanding?

Once again, not all the negative responses could necessarily and directly attributable to the sponsors or administrators of a program, and the extent to which they are so would have to be determined as part of an assessment procedure.

The Outside Perspective

The community and the society-at-large that sponsors a program also have a stake in its quality. There is a sense in which posterity itself eventually reaps the benefits to be derived from high quality early experience for its young children, and in which all society suffers social and other costs when early childhood program quality is poor[3].

All early childhood programs, whether sponsored by private or public agencies are influenced, intentionally or by default, by a variety of policies, laws, and regulations that govern them. Assessment of quality from the perspective of the larger society should be based on how citizens and those who make decisions on their behalf, might be expected to answer the following kinds of questions:

3 One aspect of the impressive preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy is the extensiveness and depth of the involvement of the whole community in all aspects of their functioning. For an interesting description of community partnerships and early childhood programming see Spaggiari (1993)

- Am I sure that community resources are appropriately allocated to the protection, care and education of our children?

- Am I confident that those who make decisions on our community's behalf adopt policies, laws, and regulations that enhance rather than jeopardize children's experiences in early childhood programs?

- Am I confident that the resources currently available to early childhood programs in our community are sufficient to yield long term as well as short term benefits to children and their families?

- Are high quality programs affordable to all families in our communities who need the service?

- Are the working conditions (salary, benefits, insurance, etc.) of the community's programs sufficiently good that the staff turn-over rate low enough to permit the development of stable adult-child and parent-staff relationships, and to permit staff training to be cost-effective?

- Are the staff members appropriately trained, qualified, and supervised for their responsibilities?

Since programs for young children are offered under a wide variety of auspices, each program can generate its own list of appropriate criteria of assessment from the outside perspective.

Implications of Multiple Perspectives on Quality

Four implications are suggested by this formulation of quality assessment for early childhood programs.

Discrepancies between Perspectives. It is theoretically possible for a program for young children to meet satisfactory standards on the quality criteria from a top-down perspective, but fall below them on the bottom-up or on the outside-inside criteria. For example, a program might meet high standards on the top-down criteria of space, equipment, or child/staff ratio, and yet fail to meet adequate standards of quality of life for some of the children according on the criteria listed for the bottom-up perspective.

The important aspect of experience is the meaning given to it by the one who undergoes it. In much the same way that the meaning of a particular word is a function of the sentence in which it appears and the paragraph in which it is embedded, humans tend to attribute and assign meanings to their experience in one situation based on their experiences in all other contexts. This being the case, the bottom-up perspective needs to take into account the likelihood that the stimulus potential of a preschool program for a particular child is a function of the stimulus level of the environment he or she experiences outside the program (Katz, 1989).

For example, a child whose home environment includes a wide variety of play materials, television and video shows, computer games, outdoor play equipment, frequent trips to playgrounds, and so forth, may find a preschool program boring that another child, whose home environment lacks the same degree of variety finds engaging. Such individual differences in the experiences of children in early childhood programs, i.e. the range of bottom-up perspectives, should be taken into account in assessing the quality of a program, and be considered in weighing the importance of the top down criteria.

In theory, a program could fall below acceptable standards on the top-down criteria (e.g. insufficient space or poor equipment) and yet be experienced as satisfactory by most of the participating children. Since I am suggesting, however, that it is the view from the bottom-up that determines the ultimate impact of a program, some flexibility in applying the top-down criteria of quality might be appropriate.

It is also conceivable that the staff might have appropriate relationships with parents, but few of the children. Or it could be that children are thriving, but parents do not feel respected, or welcomed by the staff.

On the other hand, it could be that the bottom-up assessments are low, but are high from an outside-inside parental perspective, or vice versa. For example, a staff may feel obliged to engage children in academic exercises in order to satisfy parental preferences even though the children's lives might be experienced as more satisfying if informal and more intellectually meaningful experiences were offered. In such instances the bottom-up assessment of quality is less positive than the one from outside.

Thus theoretically, it is possible that from these multiple perspectives, levels of satisfaction on the criteria proposed could vary significantly. This raises the question: Should one perspective be given more weight than another in assessing the quality of a program? If so, Whose perspective has the first claim to determining program quality?

Issues of Accountability. As suggested above, program providers can hardly be held accountable for all negative responses on the criteria listed for each perspective. Some children come to a program with problems of long standing that originated outside of it. Similarly, parents and staff may register low satisfaction on one or more of the criteria due to factors not attributable to the program itself. Some families may be struggling with the vicissitudes of their own lives in ways that influence their responses to the program but are not necessarily attributable to it.

Problems of attributing the causes of clients' perspectives on a program raise the difficult question of establishing the limits to which the staff can be fairly held accountable. As suggested above, the staff of a program is not obliged to keep everyone happy as much as it is required to apply the professionally accepted procedures as appropriate for each case. This suggestion implies that the profession has adopted a set of criteria and standards of appropriate practice. The view of the limits of staff accountability proposed here implies that at least one essential condition for high quality programs is that all staff members are qualified and trained to employ the accepted practices, accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the profession. To be able to respond professionally to each negative response from the bottom-up or outside-inside perspectives requires well-trained and qualified staff, and, -- certainly in the case of the program director.

The view of the limits of staff accountability also emphasizes the urgency for the profession to continue the development of a clear consensus on professional standards of practice below which no practitioner can be allowed to fall.

The field of early childhood education has already taken important steps in the direction of establishing consensus on criteria and standards of practice through the position papers on major issues of professional associations. The most comprehensive documents currently available are those of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs. (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The accreditation procedures and standards of NAEYC's National Academy of Early Childhood Programs (NAEYC, 1991a) covers most of the items implied by the criteria listed above. Position statements on curriculum content and assessment (NAEYC, 1991b; Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992) have also been issued by NAEYC. NAEYC's National Institute of Early Childhood Professional Education is designed to address professional development, qualifications and other issues directly and indirectly related to staff accountability for implementing professionally accepted practices.

In the case of child care programs in particular, the high rate of staff turnover, related largely to appallingly low compensation and poor working conditions in the United States (See Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 1993) and many other countries, exacerbate the problems of retaining staff with the requisite qualifications and experience required for good quality programs.

Criteria and Standards

As suggested above, any kind of assessment requires the selection of criteria and the adoption of standards at which the criteria must be met to satisfy judgments of good quality. As suggested above, each question in each of the lists above implies a criterion of quality. For the purposes of this discussion, a criterion is a dimension of experience thought to determine the quality of experience. A standard is a particular level or degree of occurrence of the criterion. Thus, for example, for the top-down criterion of ratio of adults to children, the standard of quality might be set at 1:5, 1:10, or 2:25, depending on the age of the children.

Similarly, for the first criterion listed for the bottom-up perspective: "Do I usually feel welcome rather than captured?" a standard would have to be set as to how intense, constant or enduring such feelings would have to be to meet a standard of acceptable quality. A four or five point scale on each criterion continuum is likely to be sufficient for most purposes. However, agreement concerning the point at which a standard of quality has been satisfied must be determined by the assessors. Furthermore, whether standards of quality would have to be met on all or most or particular criteria would also have to be determined by those undertaking the assessment.

High and Low Inference Variables. Assessments based on variables like the amount of space per child, qualifications of staff, observable characteristics of staff-child interaction, and other commonly used top-down indices of quality require relatively little or low inference on the part of the assessor. However, the multiple perspectives approach involves the use of high inference variables, namely inferring deep feelings of participants, staff, and thoughts of citizens.

It would be neither ethical nor practical to interview children directly with the questions posed for the bottom-up perspective. It would be ethically unacceptable to put children in situations that might encourage them to criticize their caretakers and teachers. Furthermore, from a practical standpoint, young children's verbal descriptions of their experiences are unlikely to be reliable. Thus, assessing the quality of bottom-up experience requires making inferences about the subjective states of the children. Ideally these inferences would be based on extensive contact, frequent observation and information gathering from participants over extended periods of time. In addition, reliable unobtrusive indices of children's subjective experiences are also required to assess quality from the bottom-up (See Goodwin and Goodwin, 1982).

Conclusion

Answers to the questions posed on the criteria proposed for each perspective can be used as a basis for decisions about the kinds of modifications to be made in the services offered each individual child and the whole group of children enrolled, and all of their families. In this way, each of the five perspectives outlined above contributes in a different way to an overall assessment of program quality as experienced by all who have a stake in the quality of a program. But, because not all responses can be directly attributable to characteristics of a program, the early childhood profession must continue current efforts to develop, adopt, apply an accepted set of professional standards of practice for which practitioners can fairly be held accountable. Any approach to the assessment of quality requires not only a set of criteria to apply to each program, but some consensus on the minimum standards that must be satisfied for acceptable quality on each criterion. A start has been made on the development of consensus about appropriate practices. Further discussion of these matters among practitioners, program sponsors, regulatory agencies and membership associations in the field is urgently needed.

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主題演講（一）• KEYNOTE SPEECH I
（譯文 Translation）

評估幼兒課程質素的多種角度

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引言

對幼兒教育質素的關注已成為過去十年來研討會、專題討論、論文宣讀和報告的主題。這種趨勢的形成是由於累積的研究顯示，向兒童提供任何低於水準的幼兒服務，都會失去為他們成長做貢獻的機會。這與兒童日後生活有莫大關係。但是何為優質服務呢？對學前幼兒教育及其它專業服務來說是同樣難以界定的。

這次宣讀，我會以國際性角度評論學前教育的質素問題。但卻沒有十足的信心去察視問題。即使有些國家本身，為兒童提供照顧及學前教育的服務種類形式也很廣。可能最明顯的世界性趨勢是大量托兒服務的增加。原因各有所異。有些地方由於家庭的流動性增加和傳統家庭式顧兒的服務減少，令不少家長求助於家庭以外的托兒機構。有的家長不願年長的子女承擔照顧弟弟妹妹的繁重責任，有的因為母親在外工作，而增加單身母親的人數，從而提高對幼兒服務的需求。這趨勢在世界各地相繼形成。政府和教育團體十分關注服務機構否能為兒童提供最佳學習環境的情況。因此我們可以看到世界各地廣泛的趨勢，是強調學前教育機構在教育方面功能多於只是單純為兒童提供照顧的服務。

教師質素和訓練的模式也難以從國際角度做總結的。各國訓練教師的年期幅度是0至5年。有的只限於在職訓練，有的是接受小學教育培訓，有的是在職業中學受訓。在一些國家裡，照顧三歲以下與照顧三至六歲兒童的教師是分開培訓的。另一個主要範疇是政府分化監管的安排。一些幼兒托管中心是受轄於公共福利處，有些是受轄於母嬰健康部門，有些是社會服務或教育團體，有些更受轄於教會等。各國的教師與兒童比例的各樣模式可參考一九九七年「加利福」行動計劃的例子。

差不多各地都有關於學前教育目標的爭論。主要強調的是：教育還是照顧，自發活動還是傳統的教授。特別是輔助性教育為低收入家庭的兒童提供優質服務的機會。很多國家都開始注意是否能為升讀小學一年級的兒童提供增加持續性以助順利的過渡期。

大多數的問題都曾在美國各地發生。最近調查指出大部份幼兒服務都是在可接受的水平之下。因為大量教師流失或人手浪費，破壞兒童關係的穩定性和職員培訓的效率。

所謂QCA三重關係就牽涉以上部份問題。Q代表質素(Quality)，C代表報酬(Compensation)，A代表家長的承擔學習費用能力(Affordability)。三種元素組成三角關係：

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高質素(Q)要有完善的培訓和高薪的職員(C)家長卻負擔不起學費。但要令家長負得起學費，必須調低教師薪酬，同時也破壞了服務的質素。我們有理由相信，在美國很多家庭能負起學費及得到優質幼兒服務，是因為幼兒工作者以低薪受聘。

我注意到一些國家的趨勢（例如澳洲、紐西蘭和英國），她們視幼兒教育和其它學前機構為"工業"，在美國也是很普遍的，雖然少數的幼兒教育機構的職員也會聯合，卻沒有介入任何工業談判。假如適當的說法，應視學前教育為服務，對象不是顧客，而是服務對象。分別顧客和服務對象定義不是在學術上吹毛求疵。卻更能描述專業人士和服務對象（受眾）的關係。（參考 Katz, 1995）

我認為"工業"不是一個引導任何人類服務的適當模式，包括學前教育和照顧兒童的環境。家庭和社團的本質更能為設計學前教育服務作典範。還有考慮不同年齡組合的主要原因是有益於服務對象。（參考 Katz, Evangelou and Hartmann, 1990）

總結社團和國家所面對的問題。要使所有兒童可以接受優質教育服務的發展是困難重重的。以下的提要是從不同角度的優質教育作出定義。

多種角度探討質素

我們須要應用準則來判斷一種質素的現象。觀念上，每種現象都有質素，所有學前機構也有質素，有高低，有好壞。質素判斷的問題在於採用什麼準則，如何決定及如何選擇。大部份學前教育課程的質素提議，可以透過確認所選取的有關課程、佈置、儀器及其他特點的特性評估課程。評估可由課程負責人或發牌人擔任。以上的途徑稱為"上至下"角度質素評估。另一種方法是由"下至上"角度，嘗試從兒童的實際經驗來確定課程質素。第三種方法稱為"外至內"角度質素評估。透過接受服務的家庭對課程的經驗作評估。第四種是"內至外"角度，也就是從所聘職員的經驗進行評估。最後一種角度是視乎整個團體或社會在受課程服務的情況進行評估。這途徑可稱為"外在"或在某觀念上是最終角度評估課程。今天宣讀論文的論題是指出準則是代表以上五種評估角度的優點，來考慮如何確定學前機構服務的質素。

質素評估引伸出複雜的問題：質素差的原因及如何對"誰要負責任"下定義？

"上至下"角度評估優質

"上至下"角度評估優質，主要考慮到以下課程的特色：

1. 成人和兒童的比例；
2. 教師的資格和穩定性；
3. 成人與兒童關係的特徵；
4. 儀器及材料的質量和數量；
5. 兒童活動空間的質量和數量；

6. 職員的工作環境；
7. 健康、衛生和防火安全的設備；

根據 Fiene (1992) 所說，以上的課程特色是包括在許可的方針之內的。是確保優質幼兒教育管理策略的基礎。因為幼兒工作者"可以設立令人滿意、互相影響的階段。"(p.2) 而且這些課程特色就觀察員或評估員而言，是相對的容易定量及需要少許推論的。

由托兒行動運動組織策劃，幼兒教育國際聯會製作的一份簡報名為"幼兒托管：質素是問題"指出美國對多種幼兒托管機構的質素沒有一個統一的定義。但是簡報列明以下幾項質量的基本要素：兒童與成人的比例、小組的人數、教師培訓課程及的職員更替率。(p.4)

有大量的證據可以證明以上包括在"上至下"準則內的課程和環境特色，確實能預測幼兒課程的一些效果。(Love, 1993; Beardsley, 1990; Harms & Clifford, 1998; Howes, et al, 1991; Phillips, 1987; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1998)。

"下至上"評估質量

我們可以合理的假設課程對兒童的重要及長遠的影響，主要取決於他們在其中所得的經驗。也即為從底層說起。換句話說，真正可預測課程影響的，是每位有份參與及經歷每日幼兒托管生活的兒童。

"下至上"的準則。假如兒童對課程主觀的經驗是其效果的真正決定因素，那麼富有意義的優質課程評估必須回應一條中心問題：在這種環境生活的兒童感覺是怎樣？這便須要評估員推論每位兒童會如何回答以下的問題：

1. 我是否經常覺得受歡迎多於被制肘？
2. 我是否覺得是群體的一份子多於只是他們的一部份？
3. 我經常覺得受成人接納、瞭解和保護，多於被責罵或忽視?
4. 我的家人是否得到尊敬？
5. 我是否得到同伴接納多於被排斥或孤立？
6. 我是否常受到認真和尊敬的對待多於只是被視為"可愛的"孩子？
7. 我是否覺得大部份的活動都富有挑戰性、吸引力，且能令我完全投入；還是有趣、富娛樂性和刺激感？
8. 我是否覺得大部份經驗都是有趣的，還是不值一提或沉悶的？
9. 我是否覺得大部份活動都是很有意義的，還是愚蠢或平平無奇的？
10. 我是否覺得大部份的經驗都能帶來滿足感，多於挫敗和困惑？
11. 我是否經常樂意留在中心，還是不願意前往及希望盡快離開？

這些有關質素準則的問題，都是基於我對兒童成長、發展及學習的重要影響的理解。課程的負責人也可以基於他們對文學著作有關兒童成長經驗的理解，而舉列出以上的問題。問題必需經過修飾、加減，符合其文化背景以便做判斷。

大家都同意受幼兒機構托管的兒童，在環境中應感到受歡迎，在群體中有歸屬感，受幼兒工作者的接納、尊敬和了解。此外，有關兒童另一方面的問題是強調尊重和肯定兒童的智能，及教導他們為自己行為負責，多於只要他們忙碌、開心或興奮。

準則條例的最後一條問題，反應了一個假設：假如課程的持續力是持久的，今天大部份的兒童會期望參加，且不願意離開。而他們的期望不只是參與時的"樂趣"，還有課程本身以外的其它因素影響兒童參與的熱衷。有些兒童或許會關心家中的事情。任何課程，每位兒童都有一至兩天的休息日。

經歷"樣品"。越年長的兒童，我們需要越長的時間去取得可靠的評估結果。進行評估時，幼兒需要三至四星期的日程經驗而年長的兒童需要較長的時間，才能有足夠的樣品使評估更準確，也可以預測重要的發展結果。兒童個別的幾次課程學習經驗未必會影響其長遠的發展。

我認為"下至上"角度評估課程是否優質，是要清楚兒童在某段日子（多過一個月）是否能在智能和社交方面投入及得到滿足感，而並非只取決於幾次的個別事件。

累積的影響。評估在某段時間的經驗，能幫助尋求經驗所累積的潛在影響。我假設有些童年經驗是很少發生的，對他們來說並不重要。但假如不時發生，那就會對兒童有或好或壞的影響。（參考Katz, 1995）舉例，被同伴拒絕一次是不會令到兒童受挫，但多次的拒絕所造成的累積影響（例如每日一次）就會破壞長期社交發展的穩固性。同樣道理，只有幾次甚至很少讓兒童玩積木、參與創意性的工作或其他有助成長的適當活動，就不能支持長期的發展。只有經常讓他們參與這些活動才有所幫助。

如對以上一系列的問題作出正面的回應，我們可以假設課程是值得兒童參與的，但是，如為達到優質水準的正面回應則有待決定。

不用說，兒童對上列問題給予的答案有很多種可能的解釋。課程本身是不能自動為每種負面的回應負責的。換句話說，兒童有主觀的負面經驗，是不能單單歸咎於教師。我認為他們不可能為這種情形負責，但要負責因應當時情況，應用同行公認的方法解決問題。

理想來說，質素評估應包括家長與教師關係的特點（參考NAEYC, 1991, pp.101-110）。這樣的評估要視乎家長如何回答以下問題而定：

4.

1. 我和教師的關係是互相尊重、還是互相支配？
2. 教師是否接受、開放、包容、忍耐、還是反對、指責或存有偏見？
3. 教師是否尊重我對子女的期望和價值觀？4. 教師是否歡迎家長與他們經常聯絡？

當家長和教師有著同樣的背景、語言，能分享對兒童的期望和理想時，要發展良好的關係是相當容易的。如家長明白教師工作的複雜性，欣賞他們為幼兒服務付出的努力，認識其工作環境，就更能與教師建立良好的關係。

當然有些家長對以上的問題會有反面的回應，是直接和課程及教師本身有關的。但有些原因是職員未必能夠察覺的。

「內在」角度評估質素

教師從內在角度理解幼兒課程的質素，是基於三方面的準則：（一）與同事的關係（二）與家長的關係（三）與辦學者的關係。

與同事的關係。除非校內同工關係良好，幼兒課程是不可能在準則上有高的質素。質素的評估是要基於每位同工如何回答以下問題：

整體而言，我和同事的關係是：

1. 互相支持還是常存異議？
2. 合作性還是競爭性？
3. 彼此接受還是互相排斥？
4. 彼此信任還是互相猜忌？
5. 互相尊重還是互相監督？

原則上，除非員工有個好的工作環境，否則很難為兒童製造一個優質的環境（下至上角度）。當然，假如同工肯犧牲自身的利益，就會為兒童帶來好的經驗（典型的例子：在美國的學校，經常會舉辦萬聖節聯歡會）。同樣，也會有相反的情形出現。但是，基本上，我認為優質課程是要子女與家長共同尋求一個既有滿足感且有趣的生活。

教師與家長的關係。教師與家長的關係如何，是直接影響很多早已設定的優質準則。我認為外在與內在角度的問題所引伸的準則，同樣可以應用在教師的經驗，因此，由教師角度進行的質素評估需要他們回答：我與家長是否互相尊重或互相支配等等問題。

假如家長是懂得尊重別人和容易與人建立關係，大部份都會與教師和托管人員有正面的接觸。在香港要有如此的關係是不困難的，但是有些國家，例如美國，流動性大及多種族的人口。所有家庭只受一種課程或一位老師的服務，要在課程的目標和方法上有完全共識，是不可能的。缺乏共識不可避免地會引致一些家長的不滿和與同工的磨擦。

在有多種文化背景的同工和家長中發展正面、互相尊重及支持的關係是要靠教師的專業操守，這是結合了他們的經驗、培訓教育和個人價值觀。

教師與創辦者的關係。同工與顧主的關係對課程的質素有間接的影響。園長、教師與同工以僱主對待他們的方式對待兒童。肯定的說，有的托管人員和教師待遇好，有的待遇差。但我們可以假設原則上，只有當同工受到如準則般的對待，才能為兒童提供良好的環境。Howes 和Hamiliton (1993) 最近的研究喚起對同工的流失在幼兒主觀經驗嚴重影響的關注。因此某程度上，我們在評估課程時應注意僱主對員工是否周到及給予足夠的支持。

內在角度評估質素可基於同工對以下問題的回答：

1. 工作環境是否足夠讓我提高知識、技能和工作上的委任？
2. 工作性質及職業進升計劃是否恰當？
3. 我是否受到尊重及瞭解？

再次重申，創辦者與管理人員並非要承擔所有負面的回應。但在某程度上，他們需成為決定評估程序的一份子。

外在角度評估課程質素

整個社會能夠自己維持幼教課程的質素。人們有個意念就是希望子孫能從高質素的課程經驗中得益。幼兒課程質素差會增加整個社會的負擔。

所有的幼兒課程，無論是私人的或是政府團體資助的，都會受管理他們不履行契約、不同政策、法律和規條影響。從大社會觀評估是基於市民及決策者如何回答以下問題：

1. 我是否肯定社會的資源能正確且適當地分派及用於保護、照顧和教育我們的兒童？
2. 我是否有信心那些社會決策者所採用的政策、法律和規條能夠提升兒童在幼兒課程的經驗，而不是令他們受害呢？
3. 我是否有信心已分派給幼兒課程的資源，足夠對兒童和他們的家庭有著短期甚至長期的益處？
4. 是否所有需要幼兒服務的家庭都能負擔起高質素課程的費用呢？
5. 社團舉辦的課程的工作條件（包括薪金、福利、保險）是否足以維持低職員流失率且能發展穩定的幼兒和家庭與職員的關係，員工培訓又能得到成本效益嗎？
6. 員工是否有得到適當的培訓，有專業的資格，且他們的職責是否受到監管的？

為幼兒而設的課程是由不同的舉辦者提供的，每種課程都可以以"外在"角度去制定適合本身的評估準則。

複合角度質素評估的含義

幼兒課程質素評估的程式提議了四種含義。

每個角度的不同含義。理論上，幼兒課程是能符合上至下角度質素評估準則的水平。但是卻低於"下至上"或"外在"及"內在"的準則。例如課程符合"上至下"角度評估法對空間、器材或兒童與成人比例的準則，卻不符合"下至上"角度評估法的其一點：兒童需得到一定水準的生活。

經驗的重要性在於經歷者賦之的意義。在同樣的情況下，一個出現在句子中的字眼意思成為了句子的功能。人類喜歡基於其它場合的經驗，而對偶而一次情況賦之意義。所以下至上角度評估需顧及課程對某兒童帶來的刺激潛能，可能引發他對課程以外的經驗反應。

例如孩子家里有不同種類的玩具、電視、錄影帶、電腦遊戲、戶外活動設備，而且經常去遊樂場玩，就會覺得課程沉悶。但其它家里沒有以上娛樂的兒童就會很投入。課程中，兒童不同的個人經驗下至上角度需被列在課程質素評估考慮之內。而且可用來量稱"上至下"角度準則的重要性。

理論上，課程在"上至下"準則一低至可接受水平之下。例如：不足夠的空間或儀器差，而大部份兒童都感不滿意。因為是採用了"下至上"角度決定課程的最終影響。但能彈性的採用"上至下"的課程準則會更適當。

教師有可能和家長有良好的關係，卻不能和兒童建立同樣的關係。或者兒童接受良好的托管服務，家長卻得不到尊重，得不到同工的歡迎。

另一方面，在"下至上"評估得分低，但在"內在"家長角度評估中得高分，反之亦然。例如教師被逼要兒童作課本練習，以滿足家長的意願。即使兒童透過不常規，非正式的活動，更能使他們的幼兒生活多姿多彩。在這個例子上，"下至上"評估比"外在"角度評估來得消極些。

因此理論上，採用多種角度進行評估，質素結果可能會有變動。這引申一個問題：在質素評估中是否有一個角度的評估是重要過另一個角度？假如是，哪一個角度是課程質素的決定要素？

責任問題。前文提及，課程提供者不可能為每個角度評估準則的負面回應負上責任。有些兒童在參與課程前已存有長期的問題。同樣，家長和教師不會因課程本身而給予一條、甚至多條的準則低分。可能有些家庭因要為生活的轉變而奮鬥，影響了他們對課程的回應，而又無需歸因在內的。

歸納服務對象（受眾）的角度評估課程原因的問題，引伸出為教師能公平的承擔責任而限定範圍。如上所及，教師無須被迫使每人開心，就好像有責任在每個個案適當的採用專業程序。建議意味著專家已採用一套的準則和標準的練習。教師負責的範圍限制，意味教職員必須符合優質課程的一個重要條件：他須具備專業資格、受過培訓、練習、有累積經驗和專業智慧。我們須要有接受完善培訓及具備專業資格的教師為每個對"低至高"或"外觀內觀"角度準則的負面回應作反應。當然有時要課程的董事解答。

限制職員責任的看法強調了專業人仕急需繼續在專業水平上，建立一個清楚的共識，是每位辦學者不可避免的工作。

透過針對專業聯合會的主要問題而撰寫的論文，早已使幼兒教育界在實行水平的準則上達成共識的方向邁進重要的一步。最近，出現的大部分文件是有關NAEYC在幼兒課程發展的討論(Bredekamp &Copple, 1997)。所鑑定的程序和NAEYC國際幼兒學術課程(NAEYC, 1991a)的水平也包含以上準則所引伸的項目。課程內容和評估的聲明也是NAEYC發行的(NAEYC, 1991b; Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992)。NAEYC的國家專業幼兒教育學院是為了專業發展、資格及其他有關教師在專業認可實行責任上的直接或非直接問題而設的。

特別是幼兒課程個案中，教師流失量大，與美國及其他很多國家幼兒工作者報酬低及工作環境惡劣有莫大關係(參考Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 1993)。使為了提供優質課程而接受再培訓的教師，使有關必備資格和經驗的問題更加惡化。

準則與水平

如上所及，任何評估都需要選取準則及需達到準則的一定水平。每一個問題都意味質素的準則。就這次討論目的而言，從經驗得到的準則，是測試質素的基本。水準是出現在準則的某一個程度或級數。因此，舉例"上至下"準則中按照兒童的年齡把成人與兒童的比例，質素的水平設定為1:5、1:10、2:25。

同樣地，"下至上"角度列出的第一個準則："我是否覺得受歡迎多於被困？"水準是要靠可接受質素水平的密集性；持久性和耐久性來設定。每個水準連續系統，四至五分比例，已能達到大部份目的。

但是優質水準一定要取決於評估員，而且也是由評估計劃者決定質素水準要符合全部或只是某些準則。

"上至下"推理變數，基於每位兒童的空間，職員質格，教師與兒童互相影響的可關特性及其它質素的索引。為這些變數而設的評估需要一些推論。但是多種角度的評估的途徑涉及採用高推理的變數，即是推理參與者和同工的深入感受及市民的想法。

直接訪問兒童"下至上"角度的問題是不合理且不實際的。我們在道德上也不接受要鼓勵兒童去評論他們的托管員或老師。而且從實際的看法，兒童言辭上對經驗的形容是不可靠的。因此，以"下至上"評估質素是需要兒童主觀的狀態做推論。理想點，推論可基於長時間的廣泛接觸、多次的觀察和從參與兒童所收集的資料。另外，兒童主觀的經驗中可靠而不明顯的索引是需"下至上"的角度來評估質素。(參考 Goodwin and Goodwin, 1982)

結論

每個角度中，準則所設定問題的答案，可以用來修正提供兒童及所有家長服務做決定性的基礎。這樣，各種角度的評估都在不同方面為整體課程評估作出貢獻。但由於不是所有的回應都直接歸咎於課程本身的特色，幼兒教育專家一定要繼續努力發展、採用及應用一套使辦學者可以公平地承擔責任和達到專業實習水準的準則。任何質素評估的途徑，不僅需要一套應用課程的準則，幼教工作者更需要每項準則內的基本水平上達到一致共識。有關的實踐已在進行中。而幼教工作者、辦學者及研究幼教組織在這方面的進一步討論，是非常之迫切的。